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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Fine and Applied Arts  
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MOSAIC IN PAPER

By

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May 1987

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## Introduction

"Mosaic In Paper" is a synthesis of lithographs, photo etchings, and woodcuts designed on the MacIntosh Plus computer then transferred to these processes through Xerox copies or laser print-offs.

The concept of the piece stems from the Byzantine mosaics and Gothic rose windows I saw in Europe while living and studying in Italy four years ago, as well as a brief study of Oriental rugs while designing the work.

The piece is intended to show harmony between the technology of today and the tradition of these ancient art mediums.

### My Point of View

"Mosaic in Paper" arose from some ideas I began working on last year.

Strangely enough, it began with a woodcut of fruit. Because of the medium I found it difficult to think in terms of modeling form and detail. I decided upon a rather stylized circular format which led to a more complex piece incorporating circles, crescents, and leaf forms. In this work I also experimented with metallic inks in combination with color.

When this piece was completed I began the rose window form after seeing a film which reminded me of the beautiful stained glass I had seen while living in Italy three years before. Working again in lithography I printed a simple snow flake form which satisfied me in terms of color but left much to be desired in terms of form and content. I was then introduced to the computer and played around with the mirror option on the MacPaint software disk until I made three designs which interested me. These were each two inch pieces. I made editions of each of these: two are multi-colored and the other one is printed in editions of gold and then silver on black Arches paper. In doing this project, I was impressed by the line quality possible by using the computer and the result of metallic inks on black paper. I also ran into problems with registration and in assembling the many pieces into one whole work.

It was this experience that lead me directly to making a multi-paneled piece for

my thesis. The problems I encountered on this smaller scale applied to the concept of a larger scale work and the challenge of it fascinated me. The editioning involved, the combination of printmaking techniques, the grand dimensions and the constructional demands of such a work appeared to be the perfect thesis for me.

The idea of a mosaic emerged from my experience in Europe. While I was living and studying in Italy, I had the opportunity to do a great deal of traveling. One of my fondest experiences was traveling to Ravenna and Classe on three separate occasions to view the beautiful Byzantine mosaics there. I was also taken by the St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice with its vast areas of gold leaf mosaic. In April of 1983, I made a short trip to Istanbul with my parents to view more examples of Byzantine mosaic which I had studied earlier that year. Again, I was impressed by what I saw.

For me, the most fascinating part about mosaic, stained glass, and oriental rug art forms is the overwhelming intricacy and beauty of the works on such a grand scale. Although these mediums are quite unique in textural qualities, they share a common concern with patterning, often involving symmetry, repetition, use of light as a direct element of the piece, and an overall concern for postulating an air of beauty, elegance, and in some cases also godliness appropriate for the structures in which they are all found. They are each magnificent forms merely for the work involved which certainly appears to be a painstaking and laborious undertaking.

The stained glass motif was an inspiration throughout my tour of cathedrals and churches in Europe. I have seen Notre Dame, Orvieto, St. Peter's and Milan Cathedrals as well as numerous other cathedrals and churches which house exquisite



examples of stained glass. There is a certain power in their brilliance and size that no other art medium can duplicate. For me, the rose window form is one of the best examples of beauty created by man. I have never seen a rose window that I did not like.

I wanted to include Oriental rugs amongst my inspirations because of their delicate, often complex geometric patterns. I looked over a number of catalogs before and during the design phase of my thumbnail sketches. The symmetrical layout of the "Mosaic in Paper" is due to what I saw here. Also, the use of complex linear interweavings forms and a border were ideas stemming from the rugs. Once again, I was familiar with many lovely tapestries from the time I spent in Italy, Greece, and Istanbul.

The fact that "Mosaic in Paper" shows European influences is the most important to me, the artist. Creating work of a personal value makes the task of labor much sweeter, and no doubt this is the case for me. However, the work should stand on its own whether or not the viewer has seen a mosaic, a rose window, an oriental rug, one thousand of them, or none at all.

The use of the computer was an important part in linking traditional art forms with the technology of today. By use of the computer as a drawing tool, I have been able to reach people who otherwise would have little if any interest in the fine arts. Conversely, the computer has allowed me and other artists to increase our dexterity, enabling us to create both faster and more accurately, and generate works that can be viewed as video art or that can be transferred directly to another medium.

The details I was able to achieve on the computer would have been inconceivable for me to make freehand simply because of the amount of time it would have

involved. For certain tasks the computer can be as valid a tool to the artist as a pencil or a paintbrush. Like all mediums however, it is important to choose the best medium for the job at hand. As the computer in the fine arts becomes less of a novelty and is accepted more as another tool available to the artist, I think that there will eventually be increasingly better conceptual works as well as a larger variety of media in which to display its use.

The "Mosaic in Paper" has opened up new possibilities for me, as I hope it will be the first of many more large-scale works. The theme carries enough interest and content for me to continue a series of computer drawn etchings, lithographs, and woodcuts. The use of the computer in printmaking is fairly direct and lends credibility to this new medium by presenting the computer drawn images in a compatible, traditionally accepted art form. Perhaps no other medium works quite as compatibly as printmaking, in spite of the time involved in printing.

### History

I am including a historical section to this paper that briefly describes my background and understanding of the mediums of mosaic, stained glass, and Oriental rugs. Although I do not feel that it is necessary for all viewers of "Mosaic in Paper" to have a background in these mediums in order to appreciate the work, it should explain where the ideas for the work came from. If it was not for my curiosity of the history of these areas of art, I would not have chosen to emulate them in "Mosaic in Paper".

#### Mosaics:

In order to have a clear understanding of the true beauty and historical significance of the mosaics of Ravenna, one must look at the time period during which they were created. Ravenna's mosaics are a product of three significant reigns resulting from the clash between the East and Western Empires between 306 AD and 565 AD. These three reigns (Emperor Honorius in 404 AD with his sister Gallas Placidia in 455,

Theodoric the Great in 493, and lastly, Justinian I from 527-565) brought with them to Ravenna the artisans and traditions of their respective religious empires. The change in rule is reflected in the change of mosaic styles throughout this period.<sup>1</sup>

In the first century BC Ravenna became an important headquarters for the Roman Empire because of its strategic location militarily; the city at this time had extensive canals and bridges linking the islands together, much like Venice is today. Ravenna continued to grow until 404 AD when Emperor Honorius came to power and the capital of the Western Empire was moved from Milan to the ever growing city of Ravenna. During this time an active program of building was carried out here under Honorius and his sister Galla Placidia (reign 425-450) and the art of mosaic-working flourished. In 476 the Roman Empire of the West fell to Odoacer, the first of the barbarian Kings who was murdered in 493 and succeeded by the Ostrogothic King, Theodoric the Great from Constantinople. His kingdom encompassed much of the Balkans and all of Italy. During his reign the Church of Santa Spirito and San. Apollinare Nuovo were erected and San Vitale was begun. Clashes between Arians and Catholics continued during Theodoric's reign until 539 when the Ostrogoths were driven out of Ravenna under the reign of Justinian I (527-565). There after, Ravenna became the seat of a Byzantine governor and flourished for a third time. Reunited with the Eastern Empire, Ravenna remained the sacred fortress of Byzantium, its foothold in Italy for 200 years until its conquest successively by the Lombards and the Franks. It was during Justinian's reign that Ravenna enjoyed its greatest prosperity. Today, Ravenna is best known for the Byzantium architecture and its splendid mosaics.<sup>2</sup>



Especially worth visiting are San Vitale, the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, and Sant' Apollinare in Classe. Because of the changes in reign between East and West, the mosaics in Ravenna reflect the climatic points of the city's history linked with the monuments to Galla Placidia, Theodoric, and Justinian. These mosaics, especially ones dedicated to Justinian, represent ideas that ultimately determined the forms of culture and certainly the art of the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup>

The technique used by the Byzantines in setting mosaics was a complicated one. It involved a first layer of plaster quickly covered by a second, the setting bed, often pink in color from powdered brick. On this layer the outlines of the design and any placing of inscriptions were sketched. Also, into this last bed were pressed the individual pieces of glass (mosaic tesserae). By having two layers of plaster, the moisture retained in the earlier one could be brought up by finger pressure to soften the latter one, thereby allowing the tesserae to be inserted more easily. Because the mosaic pictures were usually placed high above the viewer, the tesserae were angled down according to the height, and set projecting out from the plaster allowing light to come through the glass -of which they were primarily composed. If gold or silver leaf were used in the tesserae, it was unnecessary for the pieces to be projecting from the plaster as light could not penetrate them. From a close up view, the surface of a mosaic is rough, with a great deal of plaster showing in-between the tesserae; but because of their angling and the reflection of pieces, none of this is evident from below.<sup>4</sup>

When portraying important features, for example, the human face, the tesserae were placed closer together. The colors used look very naturalistic from below, but up

close, they are actually very impressionistic. The artists used a wide range of colored glass that from a distance is often too subtle to detect. Much of our knowledge of old techniques of making and using tesserae have been learned at the Acedemia of Fine Arts in Ravenna.<sup>5</sup>

It is also important to note that the mosaic decorations were closely related to the architectural forms of the Byzantine style. Domes, semidomes, apses, and the vaulting it self, priveded the necessary curving surfaces that concentrated light, thereby bringing out the best of the mosaic; since light was nearly always limited to a few small windows set up high, it was important to make the best use of what lighting was available.<sup>6</sup>

#### Rose Windows:

As the vaulted structures of Byzantine Architecture allowed for the curved surface

and best use of light for its mosaics, so too was the Gothic Cathedral's towering height, flying buttresses, and vaulted ceilings the perfect atmosphere to house spectacular stained glass windows, particularly the rose window. While it is somewhat of a mystery how the rose windows arrived as a structural element in Gothic architecture, it is quite possible that the concept of the giant rose windows that emerged around Paris following the three Crusades were inspired by the powerful radiating designs of many of the early Christian and Byzantine mosaics.<sup>7</sup>

The rose window first appeared around the year 1200, and within fifty years it had spread across France. Some examples can be found in England, Spain, and Italy, but for the most part they remain a French phenomenon. The majority of works are centered around Paris with the best examples in Notre Dame, Chartres, and Amiens Cathedrals. The insistence upon the rose window can be explained by looking at the symbolism involved and the background of the age.<sup>8</sup>

The extensive use of iconography in Byzantine art carries over into the Middle Ages when the Church continued to rely on symbolism in Gothic artwork to portray the teaching of the Bible. The iconography of the rose window is a complex web of shapes and often characters from both the Old and New Testaments. Because of its shape, the rose window is also related to the scientific and mathematical theories of the day. The symbolic meaning of given numbers in the Church's teaching is easily recognizable here. For example, three stands for trinity, two for perfection, and four for the elements. Because of the geometric patterning of the rose windows such mathematical relationships were commonly used and easily recognized. Chartres Cathedral is a



prime example of the symbolism involved in the use of rose windows. There are three rose windows in this Cathedral; one to the North, South and West of the nave. Some have suggested that these windows hang like stars above the nave guiding the ark through space and time ("nave" is derived from the Latin "navis" meaning ship). Also, the Northern window depicts Kings, priests, and prophets from the Old Testament and the Southern window depicts 24 elders of the Apocalypse from the New Testament and the Western window shows the Last Judgement and the creation of New Jerusalem. The nave becomes a sort of metaphysical vessel that carries mankind through time and the rose windows are the stars that guide the course.<sup>9</sup>

In his book, Rose Windows, Paiton Cowen offers the following series of symbolic relationships to the rose window:

Rose windows are an expression of the human aspiration toward wholeness and coherence. Thus, the rose windows symbolize man's highest aspirations; to know God's order to become one with Him, and ultimately to become co-creators with the creator.<sup>10</sup>

The Virgin Mary is generally portrayed at the center of the Northern rose window. She represents the sum of all the past, the culmination and the quintessence of the Old Testament, and of all that went before Christ.<sup>11</sup>

The perfect geometric disposition of the pannels in the window invites the beholder to reflect in the mind the order perceived by the eyes: to become still and at piece with oneself and with the World before acting. The rose window is the key to one's soul.<sup>12</sup>

The radiating form and pattern of most rose windows indicate many paths to one centre, and this corresponds to the paths which lead to the real self at the centre of the soul.<sup>13</sup>

Each rose window is a symbol of Love, the universe and eternity but it is also a construction that embodies geometry, number and light, and all these are components of the Logos.<sup>14</sup>



The rose becomes the flower of Mary. The rose itself is a symbol of love and of union; transferred to the window it symbolizes love of the creator.<sup>15</sup>

To unite the finite with the infinite through the square and circle is an aspiration, common to Christian and Islamic symbolism, which is embodied in a number of rose windows.<sup>16</sup>

Light to the medieval mind was a magical substance which contained the power to transform the soul.<sup>17</sup>

Geometry and number combine with light and colour in the classic North rose at Chartres.<sup>18</sup>

The universe is manifested in the form of every rose window, the concentric layers of which echo the spheres containing the sun, moon, planets, and stars. Here in the North rose of Notre Dame, the spheres contain the Zodiac, time (portrayed as the months of the year) the vices and the virtues and the prophets; all surround the Virgin Mary. She is a symbol and culmination of all time and space- or the history of the evolving universe which becomes known in the present in perfected labour through the months.<sup>19</sup>

#### Oriental Rugs:

Here, I prefer not to go into any depth of historical background in terms of "Mosaic in Paper" because this information was not considered during the construction of the work. However, what is greatly important here is the rich and sumptuous design aspect of the various rugs from such countries as: Turkey, India, Iran, Romania, Pakistan, and China, which I studied carefully during the layout of the piece. In this case, a picture is worth a million words because the symmetry, patterning, use of border, and swirling geometric forms were all a major influence on the design of "Mosaic in Paper".

It is enough to say that Islamic art has a long history of rich ornate decorative

design used in all aspects of their art, not least- the textiles. Perhaps the most prestigious and highly valued objects of all, these beautiful rugs served more than purely utilitarian or decorative purposes. Shown in homes, palaces, and mosques, oriental carpets also served as gifts, rewards and signs of political favor. By the tenth century, Moslem textiles were famous and widely exported. The Islamic people, many of whom lived the lives of nomads, favored the rugs because of their convenience in transport. Also, the rugs provided textural contrast and warmth to the stone, brick, plaster, and glazed tile surfaces of the walls and floors of the buildings they resided in. In addition, the lack of pictorial work in the form of painting (prevalent in the Christian world) due greatly to the Islamic ban of human and animal figures, made painting a rather inappropriate form of art.<sup>20</sup>

### Systems of Seeing

Early on we are instructed to view art work in terms of shape, line, value, color, space, mass, texture, proportion, movement and form. These basic elements of the visual arts help artists formulate ideas and verbalize what their work is all about. It becomes second nature for artists to consider these basic building blocks when visualizing, and in the process of creating art.

Perhaps nowhere else are these elements more obvious than in geometric art. These considerations are foremost since the concept or "subject" of the work is a play upon these elements. In such a case, what you "see" is what it is. As in the Op-Art movement, the emphasis is on simplicity and purity of shape and color.

"Mosaic in Paper" is such a work. Through a rigid coherent use of patterning of six inch prints the piece takes on a new flavor quite different from that of the individual prints. Together the prints make up a symmetrical design which might be likened to a geometric flower having a central nucleus and four petals branching out in opposite directions. However, the strong use of perpendicular lines, as well as a repetitive use of circles and squares keeps your eye moving throughout the piece. To say that the work is that of a geometric flower would be false. One seeks out patterns, movements, changes in color and value, as well as textural differences. This is what the "Mosaic in Paper" is all about.

The work is intended to be fun, interesting, beautiful, and awesome or spectacular due to its size and intricacy. It is also about the language of printmaking; both variety and monotony, possibility and structure, complexity and simplicity. "Mosaic in Paper" is easy to comprehend because it is all about viewing the work. Within it,

I hope there is something that everyone can see and appreciate. There are no deep hidden messages to seek out. In fact, "how " it was done is perhaps as fascinating and as important as "why" it was done.

I have been told that the great artists are separated from the good artists by their willingness to challenge their viewers with new ideas and techniques. Although I agree, I tend to feel that art should be for viewing and not primarily for the sake of the artist. I like to see work that the public as a whole can relate to in some way. For me, there is little sense in creating pictorial art if what is produced is not worth viewing again and again. Although I emphasize that beauty and art are not synonymous terms, I tend to lean toward beauty primarily because it is something most people can recognize and relate to. Once judged beautiful, it is then up to the viewer himself to decide whether or not the work is also worthy of being considered artistic. I think that it is important to appeal to the public on a variety of levels so that there is always a challenge present.

"Mosaic in Paper" will be successful if people consider it beautiful and then care to ask, "How was it done?" and not "Why was it done?". The emphasis here is on technique. The "why" for me is unnecessary. I wanted to see if and how it could be done. The challenge for me was in its creation; the primary challenge for the viewers is to figure out how it was made and if they are interested, why it was made. The answer to "why" - aside from seeing if it could be done, is difficult to address without going into great lengths of what it feels like for me to be an artist. Simply put, it is my own concept of beauty and harmony using the basic elements of art and design.



### Construction

Creating this work was probably the greatest challenge I have had to face as a working artist. It involved a great deal of risk taking, physical labor, and constant problem solving. It also involved a great deal of carpentry which I am indebted to my father and brothers for providing.

The work is approximately two thirds lithography and one third etchings and woodcuts. I held to my original intent of showing how various printmaking methods can work together as well as assessing how the computer relates to each of these mediums and what methods work to transfer the computer image to the printing surfaces.

I began with a five inch study for the ten foot piece which I settled upon after making fifteen to twenty of these thumbnails this past summer. The design upon which I based "Mosaic in Paper" is very similar to the final piece with the largest discrepancy being the four woodcuts in the corners of the work. Changes were also made just before adhering the six inch prints to the canvas when the four hundred prints were laid out in their entirety for the first time.

I began with the lithographs primarily because I had printed a similar but smaller series the Spring before. The "Mosaic in Paper" consists of three different editions of lithographs each of which I completed in the same manner. I began with the MacIntosh Plus computer using the "mirror" function of the "MacPaint" software disk. Using the mouse, I manipulated the mirrored computer line to form a medallion shape which resembled miniature rose windows. I designed each of the six editions using the MacPaint program just before printing each of them. The designs were all conceived

at three inches and then printed at 200 percent because the full six inch designs would not fit on the monitor screen.

Next, I made Xerox copies of the printouts so that the grease in the toner of the copies could transfer directly on to the lithography stone. With additional copies of the print-outs, I tried out a number of color schemes until I came up with one that satisfied me. The ideas of the first two lithographs was to make them look like miniature stained glass rose windows. I printed the three primary colors translucently so that when overlapped they would provide the three secondary hues.

The biggest challenge in printing the lithographs was designing an accurate registration system that would hold up to the editions of 125, 125, and 160 that I pulled. The system I used was contrived out of a registration method I had used previously in etching. I cut my paper in eight inch squares and drew an "X" diagonally across the back of each piece. These crossed lines lined up with the corresponding corner marks scratched into the lithographic stone with a razor blade. Each time I had to grind the stone down in order to print the next color, I only had to be sure that the new image lay squarely between the four marks already scratched into the stone.

Each lithograph was printed four times. I used both lithographic crayon and touche wash for laying out the colored sections- which incidentally, had been color separated on to square acetate sheets for easier transfer on to the lithographic stone. Of the three editions of lithographs, the last one was the most difficult. This one, the metallic medallion, has no background color so I had to be as precise as possible with the registration as well as keep the paper free from any stray ink that is often left by the sponge.

The two editions of rose windows were complicated by oxidation of the Senefelders ink which lay on top of the three color editions and two layers of acrylic varnish. The oxidation was cured by spraying each of the prints with fixative. However this resulted in bringing the varnish to the surface of the print, something which I had hoped to cover only with the black ink to give the illusion of light in the colored sections of the prints. As it turned out, each print looks more like a six inch glass chip used in mosaics. In contrast, the edition of metallic medallions have no varnish coating, but shine due to the varnish and pigment in the inks.

The next edition was designed to provide contrast to the reflective surfaces of the first lithographic prints. I had planned strips of black in my thumbnail sketch and in these areas I made an embossing of the fourth computer image. When designing this piece on the computer, I used a variety of the paintbrush textures available on the MacPaint program. This time I printed the image on clear acetate using the laser printer to produce a mock photo positive. With this, I made a photo etching which I printed dry on black Arches paper to make the embossings. Although the embossings are less obvious in the overall piece, they are a subtle variation which work with the other prints and add a new dimension to the piece through an added texture.

The last two series of prints, the woodcuts in the four corners and the colored etchings, were designed with the intention of brightening the overall work by creating larger areas of color. Although the rose window lithographs are quite colorful on an individual bases, they blend together as a whole creating a brownish background for the etchings, woodcuts, and metallic lithographs to rest upon.

The use of bright primary colors in the woodcuts help to break up the redundant

patterning of the six inch prints. Although these are also based on the six inch design (which here has been lithographed over the woodcuts using a Xerox transfer) the coloring helps give the illusion of eighteen inch sections. Again, we see a miniature geometric "flower" mimicking the overall design. The color of each eighteen inch section has been rearranged so that a slight break in symmetry is established. However, the strong yellow and pink center in each of these sections makes this less evident at first glance. The yellow helps draw the eye out to the corners while the blue of the four central etchings draws the eye back into the work.

The last edition, a photo etching, again breaks away from the six inch pattern. Although, in fact, the design is based again on a six inch square, the pieces fit together to make twelve inch sections. This aids in creating larger sections of concentrated color. The photo etching was printed using three different methods and color schemes in order to relate to different sections of the piece, while at the same time providing variety within the etching. Four of these etchings were printed in silver, gold, and bronze on black Arches paper. These relate well to the medallion lithographs while tying directly into the perpendicular lines formed from the embossings.

The next set of four etchings from this plate are so radically different that it is not at first apparent that they are from the same plate. Here the etching was inked in black, wiped clean, and then the surface was rolled with bright woodcut inks. These are the same intense hues that were used for the woodcuts. The yellow center of these prints also suggest a connection to the yellow centers of the woodcuts creating a tie between these two editions.

The last set in these series of etchings is a third departure in inking technique.



Here the plate was inked with the woodblock inks and then carefully wiped clean. In this case, the delicate line of the etched design truly appears. The white paper background relates the print to the medallion lithographs, the coloring to the woodcuts, and the line quality to the rose window lithographs. The white etchings set in the border of the piece break up the pattern around the outer edge of the piece. Because there is such a strong tendency in symmetrical work to be drawn inward, the use of color in the four corners and again in the border help to counter balance the inward pull, forcing your eyes to move around more actively.

### Conclusion

The technical, scientific, and economical changes in the world have directly influenced both the physical appearance and economics of the fine art world. Since the industrial revolution, works of art have been mass produced so that the uniqueness of an original work has been displaced.

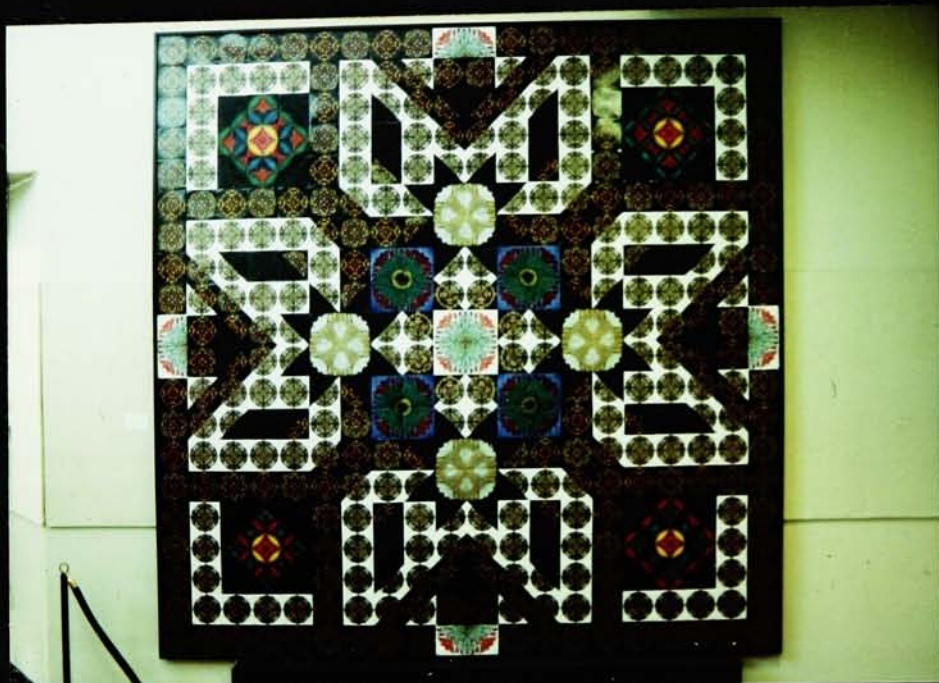
There has been unrelenting pressure on the artist to produce marketable work that uses the latest techniques while offering uniqueness, novelty, and variety. The economics of art influence what art is produced as much as new technology influences how work is produced. This in turn, has influenced where we see art. It has become more and more difficult for artists to get started in the art market since a name (or the reputation behind the name) can be more valuable than the aesthetic merits of the work itself.

Despite these odds, new artists continue to surface to the top of the art world with work that satisfies all of the above criteria. For the artist success is measured not only by the sale and exposure of his work, but by his ability too continually create a body of work that pushes his technical facilities, conceptual realms and aesthetic language. Art is a way of life as much as the body of work produced. It is a method of looking at life in the world around us and celebrating it with a personal expression of love through creative figures and an agile mind.

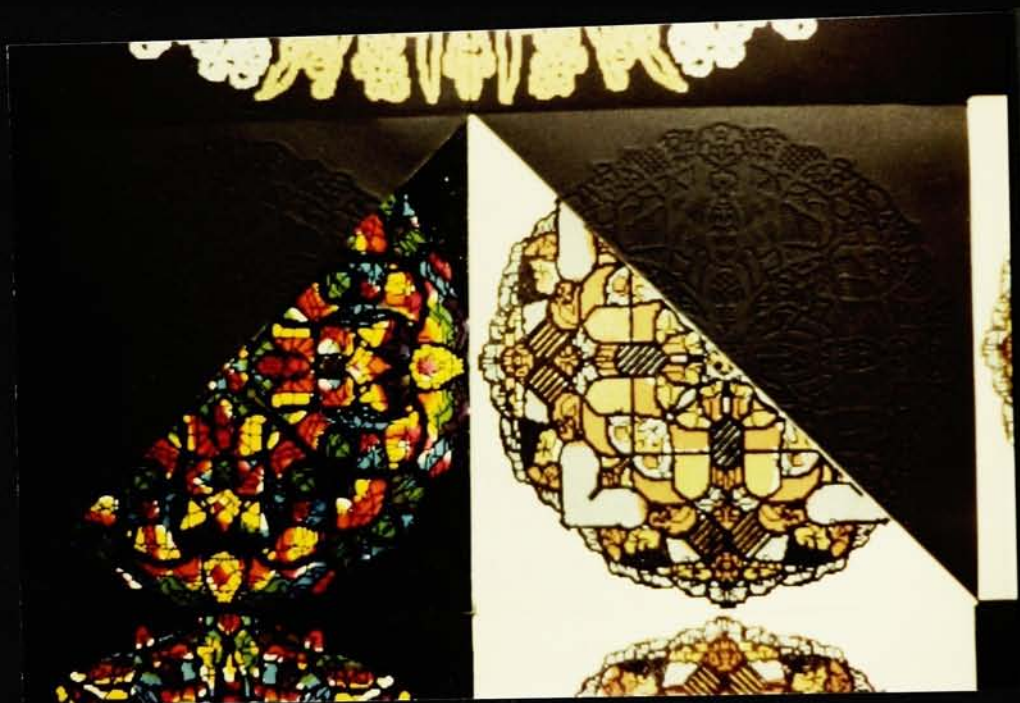
It is for this reason that I hope to continue to create work like "Mosaic in Paper". For me, this type of work presents enough of a challenge to continue my interest in combining the computer with printmaking for large scale works. I will always have my

historical influences and technical understandings to refer back to while presenting new themes and ideas in new works. As long as these ideas are new and different - at least to me- I will continue to print and build upon the work I did in this thesis.











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### Footnotes

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- 3 Ibid., p15.
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- 5 Ibid., p32.
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- 7 Paiton Cowen, Rose Windows. (CA, 1979) p12.
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